

MICHELLE MENTING

To Crack Ice

To construct the ice castle, the firemen diagram and divide, cut and saw the surface of Silver Lake. The chunks they carry are cement block size, frosted on the sides, and with cold, sharp edges. The lake there is bare, without frozen cover: exposed and open, with waves in January. It's Saturday, and the girl sits on the dock, the wharf frozen into the shoreline. The pinewood planks weren't removed in October when the snow came early and covered all reminders to take out the pier. They're a volunteer group, these firemen from town, and they do this every year, with shadows on faces, flannels beneath parkas, Jim Beam sloshing in flasks in pockets. She watches their chores. Far off from the center, she sees more than hears their cutting calisthenics. They whistle and barb, smoke cigarettes, move down and up without grace, though flurries of snow filter their roughness. She smells their smoke and knows, come spring, the butts will merge in the lake's shallows. But today she's fourteen, and a week from tomorrow her mother will make her, along with her sister, go to the ceremony downtown when the castle is finished, shiny and lit. They'll take pictures like last year, that first time when only the three of them slid against buttresses, posed on frozen steps. But now she's cold and sitting on snow. Her sweatpants are soaked. Her jacket is old, without insulation and torn in some places. She wears no gloves, curls her fingers up into her sleeves. The wind picks up. The snow now slants. Sharp crystals bite the pores on her cheeks. The men laugh and cut, brush off fallen snow, which is clean and white and keeps on falling. She notices this: the falling snow, coming down thicker and faster, makes cutting a chore. The men move slower. Their laughter fades. The smoke disappears. She picks herself up, brushes herself off, cracks a smile as she leaps off the pier.

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ABOUT MICHELLE MENTING

Michelle Menting is the author of *Myth of Solitude* (Imaginary Friend Press 2013) and *Residence Time* (dancing girl press 2016). Her work has also appeared in *The Southeast Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *DIAGRAM*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *The Ocean State Review*. She received a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Nebraska, and she now lives in midcoast Maine.

